

ON THE "ONVAR" OF MALEKULA, NEW HEBRIDES.

BY WALTER R. HARPER.

That the use of the bow, just as the potter's art, should never have spread into Polynesia is strange, but not more so than the fact that in many islands of the Western Pacific it is unknown or else is merely a toy for children.

For instance, a bow 6 feet in height and strung with a strip of rattan is a formidable offensive weapon in the Papuan Gulf, up the Fly River, and in North-eastern New Guinea, yet the natives of vast areas of that island (as in the south-east) are unacquainted with it. In the Bismarck Archipelago it is used as a toy on New Britain,* and on New Ireland not at all.† In the Solomon Group, although known in all the southern islands, it has given place to long, heavy thrusting spears, and, in places, slings,‡ except on Malanata, where it is still used in war. On Guadalcanar, a small bow "with arrows made from the midrib of the sago-palm is used solely for shooting birds or fish."§ In the Santa Cruz Group it is an implement of warfare, and in the Banks Islands is the principal weapon, spears being practically unknown there.|| Where it has not been displaced by firearms, it is common through the New Hebrides, together with spears and slings. It is known in the Loyalty Group,¶ but is not found on the great neighbouring island of New Caledonia. In the Fijis, the limit of its distribution to the east, it is little more

* Rev. B. Danks, Report Aust. Assoc. Adv. Science, Vol. iv.

† Ratzel, "History of Mankind," Vol. i., p. 234.

‡ Codrington, "The Melanesians," p. 305.

§ C. M. Woodford, "A Naturalist among the Head-Hunters," p. 30.

|| Codrington, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

¶ Ratzel, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

than a toy. When one remembers that over a great part of the area traversed above defensive armour of any kind is unknown, the neglect of such a serviceable weapon as the bow is rather surprising.

Whatever may have been the process of evolution of the bow, it is probable that the necessity for some protection for the hand from the recoiling bowstring became early evident. Schliemann* in his excavation of the fourth city on the site of Troy, discovered a flat oblong-shaped object made from bone and pierced with three holes. Sir John Evans identified it "as a guard or bracer used by archers to prevent the wrist being hurt by the bowstring. . . . The guards or bracers found in England are of stone and have three perforations at each end." This identification would have been difficult had we not an example of almost exactly similar guards in use by the present Eskimo "composed of several pieces of bone tied together and fastened on the wrist by a bone button and loops."† Occasionally the guard is part of the bow, as with the Monbutto. Schweinfurth says,‡ "These bows are provided with a small hollow piece of wood for protecting the thumb from the rebound of the string." Mason§ compares this with the guard used by the Tinneh Indians, "which is a bit of wood the shape of a bridge on a violin attached to the bow and not to the shooter's wrist." Other of the American tribes use a band of leather round the left wrist,|| sometimes ornamented with pieces of inlaid silver. In Europe the Mediterranean form of arrow release¶ was used in the Middle Ages and is used now by modern archers. "A leather glove or leather finger strings are worn, as Roger Ascham expresses it, "to save a man's fingers from hurtinge."

* "Ilios," p. 566.

† Wood, "Natural History of Man," Vol. ii., p. 710.

‡ "The Heart of Africa," Vol. ii., p. 111.

§ "The Origin of Invention," p. 386, and Smithsonian Report, 1893, p. 677.

|| Bancroft, "Native Races of America," Vol. i., pp. 494 and 578.

¶ See a résumé of Professor Morse's interesting paper on "Methods of Arrow Release" in "Nature," Vol. 35, pp. 13 and 14.

In Asia the Mongolian release is common. "The thumb is protected by a guard; the Manchus, Chinese and others use a thick ring worn near the base of the thumb. It may be made of any hard material, such as horn, bone, ivory, quartz, agate, or jade."

The Japanese archer uses a glove consisting of the thumb and two fingers,* or a guard on the outer side of the forearm.† In the Western Pacific‡ by far the most elaborate guards are found in New Guinea. They are made of wickerwork or finely plaited grass, and stretch from the wrist to the elbow. A decorative effect is obtained by weaving or plaiting; sometimes plumes of cassowary feathers are fastened to the upper end. Frequently bands of bark are substituted, ornamented by incised patterns.

These New Guinea guards may be called arm-guards,§ to distinguish them from those of the New Hebrides, which are really thumb-guards. What seems to me a feasible explanation of the difference between the two is that the stiff rattan string of the New Guinea bow does not recoil as far as the fibre cord of the New Hebridean bow, and consequently the smack would be felt on the fore-arm and not on the hand. Besides, the bows are lighter in the south, and the string lies more closely to the wood.

In the Solomon Group and in islands further to the south, the guard is made from a strong creeper. A length of the plant is taken, split into two, the ends pared down and a spiral wrist band formed.

Intermediate between these two (British N.G. and Solomons) is the arm-guard of German New Guinea. Like that of the Solo-

* "Nature," *l.c.*, p. 14.

† Mason, Smithsonian Report, 1893, pp. 635-637.

‡ For drawings of several guards from this area, see Edge-Partington's Ethnographical Album, 1st Series, Plate 146, figs. 2 and 3; 2nd Series, Plate 78, fig. 9; 3rd Series, Plate 87, figs. 1 to 5.

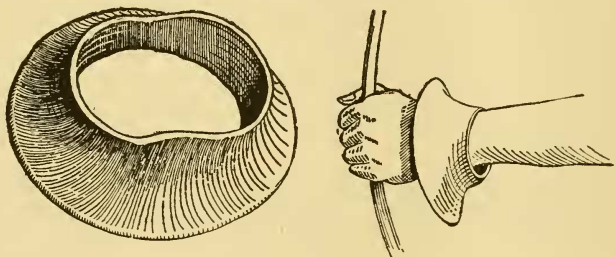
§ Not *armlet*. This word, so frequently used in the above sense by writers on New Guinea, &c., should be confined to the rings or bands which are worn as decorations round the upper part of the arm. Any other use of the term is very confusing.

mons, it consists of a spiral bandage made from a creeper, and like that of the Fly River it extends from the wrist almost to the elbow.

The guard used on Efate, New Hebrides, is very simple. It consists merely of a plain ring cut from a hard wood and rounded on the outside.

The "onvar" or thumb-guard of Malekula, though itself simple enough, is a slight improvement on this form. It was first mentioned by Cook* and described by Forster† in his account of the voyage. "On the left wrist they wore a circular wooden plate neatly covered and joined with straw about five inches in diameter, upon which they broke the violence of the recoiling bowstring and prevented it from hurting their arms."

Forster here describes one of the highest class "onvars." Sometimes they are in two pieces and are fastened by long lengths of the thin inner bark of a vine neatly worked over all round. Again, they are frequently in one piece over the outside surface of which the bark is plaited. It is probable that these decorated guards are insignia of chiefs, as are occasionally the spiral bands in the Solomon Group.‡ However, the general form



is a circular piece of hard though light wood about 3 c.m. in thickness, 12 c.m. outside diameter at the base, bevelled off to an outside diameter of 7 c.m. at the top and pierced by a hole large enough to admit the hand of the wearer. The average diameter

* Cook's "Voyages," Vol. v., p. 35.

† G. Forster, "Voyage round the World," Vol. ii., p. 215.

‡ Ratzel, *l.c.*, p. 227.

of this opening in five specimens given me by the Rev. T. Watt Leggatt, of Malekula, is 6.5 c.m., but of course the size of the hole is regulated by the size of the hand and wrist of the man for whom it is intended. The drawings herewith* give a very good idea both of its general shape and the method of wearing it. An examination of these objects seems to emphasize a remark of Forster's†:—"They were all remarkably slender. . . . Their limbs were indifferently proportioned, their legs and arms long and slim." The average European would find it impossible to put on the average Malekulan "onvar." However, in this respect the Malekulese are not peculiar amongst the lower races.

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTE.—Since writing the above I have obtained further information from Rev. T. Watt Leggatt, of Malekula. The simple spiral band mentioned as being used in the islands to the north is also common in Malekula, together with a simpler form, consisting merely of the mid-rib of a banana leaf twisted round the wrist. The form figured is worn loosely as a rule; but when fighting is imminent it is laced tightly with a grass fibre.

Further, Mr. Leggatt has investigated the name usually given for the guard, viz., "onvar." He discovers that the correct title in the Aulua district (Port Sandwich) is *nehonvar*, derived from *nehono*, the face, and *verua*, the hand—*ver* or *var* being the root for hand, as *verangk*, my hand; *verim*, thy hand; *verua*, his hand. The word really means the face of the hand, *i.e.*, the thing that stands before the hand to protect it.

In the Maskelyne Group, south of Malekula, the guard is called *nahonva*. In Pangkumu it is named as at Aulua. In the Uripio district the word used is *bekver*, the derivation of which Mr. Leggatt has not been able to discover (*Sept. 28th, 1901*).

* For which I am indebted to Mr. Chas. Hedley.

† G. Forster, *l.c.*, p. 206.